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Poems

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Abstract

INHERITANCE, SOUTHBOUND, SPIDERS

Graham Mort

INHERITANCE

He watched the first snowflakes abseil
into the yard's stink, melting on dung
he'd forked there, making the farm dogs
whimper, yelp, snatch at their chains.

That morning lapwings had dropped into the fields,
surprising him with their jester's flight:
too early for spring, the wind was in the north
and each bud a blackened tip of steel.

The week before he'd watched cherry blossom
in the graveyard. Now this wind would strip each
branch to its filament, its wake of frost
clamp shut the throats of crocuses.

Last night the sun had fallen slobbering
at the red lips of clouds, pleading
to be out into the bloody world;
it sank unheeded and with it sank the light.

Then the wind had moved a compass point,
its anticyclone whorling over the North Sea,
bringing its inheritance of cold to dull him –
like uncashable war-bonds, the Fordson, the land.

It frayed his knuckles where he worked the fields'
need of him, walling up gaps where frost
and thaw had shunted stone downhill
to let his pregnant ewes stumble through.

It froze the promise in his mouth, stung
him with hailstones' unrelenting kisses.
She was in the valley, bellyful of his child,
a thin acre of this farm already sown in her.

That night, alone, he cradled his head
at the fire, smelling sweet muck dry in its heat;
alone, letting the wind go over the fell,
the river glitter towards imagined cities.

He went outside to lean against a solid wall
of cold, blinking the Plough's stars from his eyes,
letting the door creak on its hinge of light,
his breath drift, white as a moth's flight.

SOUTHBOUND

Last night we went missing from
the world, had to drag sleep's
drowning to surface for this train,
southbound, late and slow as a cortege.

Pigeons flocked into apricot clouds
from the station's roof of glass;
we walked the platform, rolled newspapers
into wads and thumped our legs.

Now there's rain, the train swishing
over sleepers, the conductor reciting
his poem of destinations, warming each
town's cold consonants Jamaican-style.

At Warrington chimneys spindle
the mist, spinning hanks of smoke;
the track's drawn threads gleam under
a gnawed moon's waning into day.

Those travellers watch us and wait,
their breath white, their faces
vague as ingots cooling in a tank.
We judder on the squeal of brakes,

slip into the suction of gathering light.
A woman eats her yoghurt with a silver key,
a man spins a yellow pear,
that girl sleeps with folded hands

and will wake soon to make her face.
Rain flecks the windows, slakes
dried sorrel in fields below where
a white mare runs by the fence

flicking back her head
from the brink of our din.
A signalman stares from his lit box,
hands parting the track, neat

as sugar tongs to send us south.
The conductor's voice comes again, its hymn
sing-song and sorrowful, pronouncing each
place's name until we're almost sure it's there.

SPIDERS

The spiders stayed awake again.

I call you and you leave the bed
to see: at work all night
wiring up the apple trees,
the windows, the angles
of the broad bean canes,
all aerialised for some broadcast
far beyond our frequencies.

Their threads gleam like fishing line
disappearing into the air's depth,
melting in the sun which has risen
again to burn off the dew, dust shadows
from under roofs, shape-shift hills
that smoulder in heaps of cooling slag.

Spiders' reproaches are everywhere:
Work! Work! Work!
each one a steeplejack welding
his steel filaments to a frame,
a tight-rope star burnishing her own
glittering steps above the night.

They know how to wait
and how to betray,
how to say nothing and lie still,
how to seem a shadow of shadows
a silence of the silence,
how to look away whilst looking on;
their eyes multiply the frail-winged
prizes of the day.

They are hidden and waiting –
everywhere –
for that first faint touch
to bring them unblinking to the light.

It comes: expected, surprising
as my mouth reaching to kiss
pale hair on your neck's curve,
sudden as your tears, stopped
on my unbuttoned sleeve.